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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

In Alaska we stayed over a couple of days on the Kenai Peninsula. Glaciers and wildlife refuges and an excellent boat charter in Resurrection Bay highpointed the area.

Early in the mornings, we shifted for ourselves to find breakfast. The 6 a.m. openings filled up in 10 minutes with eager transients, idle fur trappers and hardluck prospectors mixed among the commercial fishermen.

On one of the races for a table a huge Polish fellow dressed in a red wool turtleneck sweater invited me to sit in his booth. Windy as the early risers in Texas, he immediately launched an autobiography of his Alaska days, starting with the third gold rush of 1973.

He took over everything on the table but the check. "Done a lot of stupid things since I ran off from home as a kid from Poland," he said. "Lost \$200,000 up here during a gold rush in 1973. Once knew a prospector down in Brazil who found an uncut diamond worth a million and a half. Know what he did? Threw a big drunk and in three days was back in the jungle hunting treasures."

I was in a big hurry to catch the boat going out on the Bay, or I'd have pitched a couple of balls myself.

Smithsonian had made an excellent choice of charters, led by a captain of charters, led by a captain who resisted

the urge of tour guides the world over to make their spiels about as entertaining as a six-hour concert by a hurdy-gurdy man.

At lunch the group and the crew had a surprise. While we were watching a huge glacier send ice booming off into the water, an earthquake was taking place.

Later the Anchorage newspaper reported the quake at 3.5 on the Richter scale. But the same issue had a story of a fisherman down south boating a 422-pound halibut in a 14-foot skiff. The best evidence of the quake's severity was the jar of boiled eggs on the ship's bar coming out uncracked. At a buck-fifty per egg, if the captain had known an earthquake was taking place he'd have ordered the steward to hold eggs in his lap.

Eggs are in shorter supply in Alaska than imaginative reporters or second-string earth tremors. However, we were told that in 1923 the federal government set out to help fox farmers by giving them chickens to feed the foxes and sending free corn to take care of the holdover time on the chickens. Snoopy auditors ruined the deal by discovering the chickens were ending up on grills and the corn was being used to make whiskey to soften the blow of the then-in-effect prohibition laws.

Sea air on the Bay chilled us through layers of clothes. The Smithsonians were loosening up a bit. Their

fingers were more numb from shooting pictures than from the cold weather. Whales and arctic birds had caused them to burn up a lot of film.

On shore I found that the Polish guy had disappeared. I sure wanted a rematch on the diamond story. Meanwhile, word passed around that a black male mosquito had field dressed 46 pounds after a two-day shrink en route to the scales.